



Venezuelan opposition politician Freddy Superlano speaks to the media after his release from house arrest under a limited amnesty law passed by the National Assembly, outside El Rodeo detention center in Guatire, Venezuela, on Monday. PHOTO: REUTERS

Pollution exposure linked to mental health problems: EU agency

AFP, Copenhagen

Environmental pollution is linked to several mental health disorders in Europe, the European Environment Agency (EEA) warned yesterday, arguing that enforcing legislation would result in Europeans being both less depressed and less anxious.

Air, noise and chemical pollution are to blame in particular, according

to the EU agency.

"Studies consistently indicate that air pollution, for example in the form of fine particulate matter (PM2.5) and nitrogen dioxide (NO2), is associated with depression and depressive symptoms," the agency noted in a report.

Exposure to lead, endocrine disruptors and other chemical substances, especially in

"developmental life phases, may increase the risk of mental health issues later in life," it added.

Furthermore, noise pollution, from air and road traffic, may be linked to an increased risk of depression and anxiety, particularly for vulnerable people.

"Progress towards zero pollution targets can deliver co-benefits for mental health and well-being," the EEA said.

Police likely to revert to old uniform

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the condition of anonymity.

The Bangladesh Police Service Association in a statement on February 24 said the new uniform selected by the interim government ignored police members' complexion, the country's climate and their opinions.

The attire closely resembles uniforms of other agencies, making it difficult to identify police personnel in the field. Besides, most members were not in favour of the hurried change.

Apart from visibility issues, questions have been raised over the quality of the fabric supplied for the new uniform.

Laboratory tests found the shirt fabric did not meet contractual specifications: the required yarn density was 205 GSM (±5), but tests reportedly found it to be 193 GSM, according to PHQ officials.

The moisture-wicking capacity, essential for officers working long hours outdoors, was also below standard.

While the contract required a wicking capacity of 6-10 centimetres, tests showed it to be around 4.5 cm.

Wicking measures how effectively sweat is drawn away from the body, and textile experts say fabric below 6 cm is unsuitable for active outdoor duty, as it hampers temperature regulation and increases fatigue.

Such shortcomings make the uniform particularly uncomfortable during extended duty in hot and humid conditions.

The fabric was supplied by Noman Group.

Nurul Islam, chairman of Noman Group, could not be reached for comment.

However, he had earlier told reporters that the material had been tested by independent international agencies before delivery and met all tender specifications.

A Tk 141-crore tender was called for the new uniform in 2025. Noman Group was awarded the contract as the lowest bidder and has already supplied some of the fabric. While the

new uniforms have been distributed in major cities, they have yet to reach all districts.

PHQ declined to provide details on how many uniforms have been produced or the exact expenditure on the fabric.

The government would not incur any financial loss if the uniform is changed again, said Mosleh Uddin Ahmed, additional inspector general (Logistics and Asset Acquisition).

Police members are provided with new uniforms every year under a specific government allocation. The uniforms distributed last year were part of that annual provision.

"If a decision is taken to change the uniform again, we will simply stop producing the current design and move to the new one."

Those who have already received uniforms will not get another set immediately; they will receive the new design during the next annual distribution cycle.

"There is no issue of financial loss here."

'Tricked into war'

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FROM DHAKA TO MOSCOW

According to the report, Bangladeshi victims typically leave Dhaka for Saudi Arabia on religious visas or travel to Dubai on tourist visas. From there, brokers help them secure Russian visas before flying them to cities such as Saint Petersburg or Moscow.

John Quinley, director of Fortify Rights, said testimonies from both brokers and recruits indicate cooperation with Russian authorities in facilitating the process.

Once in Russia, most men are allegedly forced to sign contracts written in Russian, a language they cannot read, before being transported to military facilities and later fed to the frontlines.

Between May 2025 and February 2026, Fortify Rights and Truth Hounds conducted 24 interviews in Bangladesh and Ukraine, including with survivors who returned home, relatives of men killed in combat, anti-trafficking police, and service providers to get data.

PROMISED JOBS, DELIVERED TO WAR

Researchers say brokers target men from low-income backgrounds, offering promises of work as cleaners, factory workers, or electricians.

Arman Mondol, 23, from Rajbari, Dhaka, told the researcher he was promised around US\$1,000 per month and assured he would travel to a European country, not Russia.

The report quoted him as saying that he first travelled to Saudi Arabia, obtained a Russian visa there, and then flew to Saint Petersburg.

Within days, he found himself undergoing military training.

"I attended basic training for 10 days. I was trained to use rocket launchers and shoot a machine gun. It was an AK 47... I went to Ukraine to fight for 15 days. It was intense fighting," he said.

Another survivor, Maksudur Rahman, 31, said he travelled from Dhaka to Dubai and then to Moscow after losing his job in Malaysia. At Moscow airport, brokers allegedly

demanding additional money.

"Groups of Bangladeshis were taken one by one into airport toilets, where cash was collected... I paid about US\$1,000 under pressure," he said.

Believing he was signing a cleaning-services contract, he signed a document in the Russian language, later to discover it was a military contract.

COERCION AND ABUSE

The report says many men corroborated accounts of being routed through third countries, handed contracts they could not read, and transferred to military training facilities shortly after arriving in Russia.

Several survivors described being sent into combat with little or no training.

Others reported beatings by commanders, denial of pay, confiscation of passports, and threats when attempting to leave.

One Bangladeshi survivor described the battlefield as a "meat grinder" where escape was nearly impossible due to checkpoints and constant drone strikes.

Photographs included in the report show a Russian military-issued identification tag belonging to Mohammad Masud, who later fled and returned to Bangladesh after enduring beatings and other abuses in the Russian army.

FAMILIES PAYING THE PRICE

Back home, families often sell land or take high-interest loans to pay recruitment fees -- often thousands of US dollars -- to brokers.

The report notes that families were left in crushing debt after paying such fees, only to later receive news of a son or husband killed on the frontlines.

Habibullah, a Bangladeshi man who died on the frontlines, last spoke to his family on May 1, 2025. During that call, he pleaded, "Please save me if you can. I haven't eaten for three-four days," according to the report.

Bangladesh's Anti-Human Trafficking Unit has acknowledged

that economic desperation and lack of awareness are key drivers behind the rise of trafficking syndicates that fed civilians to sustain Russia's war in Ukraine.

Mohammad Badrul Alam Molla, special superintendent of police at the Criminal Investigation Department, was quoted in the report as saying in January 2026 that trafficking networks exploit men from rural or disadvantaged backgrounds by offering unrealistic promises of high salaries and secure jobs abroad.

CALL FOR ACTION

Amy Smith, executive director of Fortify Rights, said recruitment through deception, cross-border transport, and exploitation on the battlefield meets the definition of human trafficking under international law.

"If you recruit someone through deception, you transport them across borders, and you force them into exploitation even on the battlefield. That is human trafficking," she said.

The report urges the Bangladeshi government to dismantle local broker networks, monitor migration routes through Middle Eastern transit hubs, and press Russia to withdraw trafficked Bangladeshi nationals from the frontlines.

It also calls for systematic documentation of recruitment methods and intermediary networks, as well as accountability measures at national and international levels.

As the war grinds on, the report warns that Bangladeshi men continue to risk becoming "expendable manpower" in a conflict thousands of miles from their homes.

During the briefing yesterday, Maria Tomak, researcher and advocacy expert at Truth Hounds, characterised the findings as evidence of "predatory recruitment done by Russia [that] is spread all around the globe."

She noted the far-reaching impact of the conflict, stating that not only are Ukrainian people affected by the war, but it appears that Bangladeshi people are as well.

EU asylum applications down but Iran concerns mount

AFP, Brussels

Asylum applications to the EU dropped by almost 20 percent in 2025, the bloc's asylum agency said yesterday -- warning however that a crisis in Iran could result in refugee movements of "unprecedented magnitude".

Turmoil in the Islamic republic risked upending a downward trend in requests for protection, the European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA) said, in a report written before the outbreak of the US-Israel war with Iran.

"With a population of approximately 90 million, even partial destabilisation could generate refugee movements of an unprecedented magnitude," the EUAA said.

The prospect, which is likely to worry EU nations that have long worked to curb inbound migration, was discussed at an extraordinary meeting of the bloc's foreign ministers Sunday, according to diplomatic sources.

And the issue will be on the agenda as the EU's 27 interior ministers meet

in Brussels on Thursday.

The European Commission said Monday it was "enhancing preparedness through closer monitoring" of the situation and reinforcing cooperation with relevant United Nations agencies and partner countries.

Asked for a fresh assessment as the Iran war spread across the region, the EUAA said it was "not in a position to comment on any impact the ongoing hostilities in the Middle East may have".

"The situation remains very fluid and it would be irresponsible to make any hypothetical or predictive statement," it said.

Its report said displacement of just 10 percent of Iran's population would rival the largest refugee flows of recent decades, albeit cautioning that the scenario remained "highly speculative".

Citing mass protests against Iran's clerical authorities and last year's US-Israeli strikes on its nuclear facilities, the agency described the country as a "potential flashpoint" in a highly volatile global environment.

"The decline in applications

should therefore be interpreted with caution," it wrote.

Iran is among the world's top hosting countries for refugees, it noted.

The country is home to about 2.5 million refugees, mainly Afghan nationals, according to the UN refugee agency.

So far, Iranian displacement has remained limited, the EUAA said.

The country's nationals lodged only 8,000 asylum requests in the European Union plus Switzerland and Norway (EU+) in 2025, making them the 31st largest group of applicants, said the EUAA.

EU+ nations received around 822,000 asylum applications in 2025, down 19 percent on the previous year. That followed an 11-percent decrease in 2024.

The 2025 drop was largely driven by fewer applications by Syrians, Bangladeshis and Turks, the agency said.

Afghans accounted for the most requests, filing 117,000 applications -- a 33-percent increase on the previous year -- followed by Venezuelans, with 91,000.

7yr-old victim dies

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Her body was sent to the morgue for autopsies.

On Sunday afternoon, the child was rescued with her throat slit on a hill inside the park by a group of labourers and rushed to the upazila health complex. The same day, her mother, Rokeya Begum, filed a case with Sitakunda Police Station against unidentified accused.

After being transferred to CMCH, she underwent a surgery on Sunday evening when doctors performed an emergency tracheostomy to help her breathe and inserted a tube to stabilise her airway. She then had a second surgery on Monday morning.

Her paternal uncle, Ramij Uddin, said she appeared to be stable when he left the hospital around 10:00pm that night. "She was doing well at that time... Her condition suddenly deteriorated around 1:30am, and she died in the ICU."

At the briefing, SP Nazir said Babu Sheikh had a prior feud with the victim's father, Monir Hossain, which led to the incident.

"Babu Sheikh lured the girl with chocolate and took her to Sitakunda Eco Park from Kumira by bus. Later,

he took her to the top of a hill and attempted to rape her there. When the victim started screaming and threatened to inform her family, he slit her throat with a sharp knife and left her there. ... The girl managed to survive and walked while bleeding.

"After receiving the complaint, police began collecting CCTV footage from Kumira to Sitakunda and traced Babu. He was later arrested in Kumira. Police took him to the crime scene, where officers recovered the victim's blood-stained trousers."

The SP added, "Police seized the clothing as evidence. During primary interrogation, Babu admitted that he attempted to rape the girl but failed. We will cross-examine the victim's samples with his DNA samples."

"During primary interrogation, the accused told police that he tried to rape the girl but failed. After receiving the forensic report, we will make an official statement."

Contacted by The Daily Star, CMCH Director Brigadier General Taslim Uddin said, "Doctors found scratch marks near her genitals during the primary examination. Following due procedure, we will cross-match the accused's DNA with the victim's to confirm whether she was raped."

Anxiety grips migrants

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according to the Civil Aviation Authority of Bangladesh and airport officials.

Of the cancelled flights, 147 were from HSLA in Dhaka and 35 from Shah Amanat International Airport in Chattogram.

Yesterday alone, 38 flights were cancelled, they said.

Amid the worsening security situation in the Gulf, Biman Bangladesh Airlines has suspended, until further notice, all flights to six destinations -- Dammam, Doha, Dubai, Abu Dhabi, Sharjah, and Kuwait, said Bushra Islam, the national carrier's general manager (public relations).

She requested passengers travelling to those destinations to contact the nearest Biman sales centre or their travel agency.

Meanwhile, the situation has hit labour-dependent Middle Eastern destinations particularly hard, leaving thousands of expatriate workers uncertain about when they can return to their jobs.

Airport officials said many passengers have been coming to the airport daily, even when services remain suspended, hoping for updated information or last-minute changes.

Contacted by The Daily Star earlier, Shariful Hasan, associate director of BRAC's Migration Programme and Youth Platform, said, "Bangladesh sends more than 10 lakh workers abroad every year, with 70 to 80 percent going to the Middle East alone -- including Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait, and even Jordan and Lebanon."

"If overseas employment in the Middle East becomes limited or comes to a halt, and our workers go there and fail to find work, it will cause long-term damage for us," he said, adding that the fallout would be multidimensional.

"So right now, I think we need to keep a close watch so that our workers are not harmed and the country does not suffer."

During a visit to the airport yesterday, these correspondents saw second floor busier than usual, with travellers in both Terminal 1 and Terminal 2. Several passengers were seen sitting with packed luggage, looking tense and unsure whether they would be able to fly.

Those whose flights were still scheduled, particularly to the Middle East, also appeared anxious, fearing

what they might face upon landing.

Relatives repeatedly called some passengers, urging them not to panic, while others said they had been waiting for hours at the airport for alternative flights or updated information after learning their previously-scheduled flights were cancelled.

Anis Mia, 51, from Tangail's Delduar, said his visa had only four days of validity left.

Scheduled to fly on SriLankan Airlines at 1:00pm yesterday, he arrived at the airport in the morning and learned that the flight had been cancelled.

Anis reached Dhaka from Tangail at 9:00pm the previous night and later learned that flights to Dammam -- his destination -- were not operating.

"I was told arrangements would be made within the remaining four days, but as of last night, I am still waiting at the airport with my family. I don't know if another flight will be arranged for me."

Saiful Islam, 30, a Dubai expatriate from Kishoreganj Sadar, said he checked in by 10:45am yesterday for a US Bangla flight scheduled to depart at 4:45pm. "I learned around midday that the flight had been cancelled, and airline staff advised me to contact the agency from which I bought the ticket."

Saiful said he would wait until 5:00pm in case any new arrangement was made.

He described feeling deeply anxious after seeing content on Facebook and YouTube about bombings and insecurity in the region, adding that his family repeatedly called him, worried about whether he should travel.

Saiful said he felt torn -- eager to leave yet fearful about what might happen after arriving, including whether he would find safety and work, and whether fresh trouble could emerge.

Sanjay Das travelled from Gopalganj's Muksudpur to Dhaka early yesterday and arrived at the airport around 11:00am to fly to Dammam after spending six months on leave.

He too was told his flight had been cancelled and that he should contact his agency.

Sanjay said the agency later informed him that he could travel on a Riyadh-bound flight at 5:00am today (March 4). "I am now staying in Farmgate. But I am still worried about whether I will be able to fly as scheduled, whether

BFIU seeks

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public. Before resigning, I had already submitted my income and asset details to the Cabinet Division."

Asif was one of three student representatives who served as advisers in the interim government formed after the July uprising.

He oversaw the ministries of Local Government, Rural Development and Cooperatives, and Youth and Sports.

Asif joined the NCP after stepping down from his advisory post on December 10 last year.

Triceratops skeleton

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welcomed visitors at the 1995 grand opening of the Wyoming Dinosaur Center in Thermopolis, where it remained on loan until 2023.

Following a recent private sale, the skeleton is currently in Singapore, where it is being offered for private viewings until the end of March, according to Joopier.

Palaeontologist Andre LuJan, who assisted Joopier in preparing the fossil for auction, noted Trey's unique appeal: "Trey has this cultural aspect that a lot of fossils that go to auction these days just simply don't have. This one is connected to people and undoubtedly has inspired young children who've seen it to pursue a career in palaeontology."

the flight will operate, and what the situation will be like after I land there."

Meanwhile, at the lower level of HSLA, arrivals from Middle Eastern countries drew emotional scenes as relatives greeted returning workers with flowers and tight embraces.

Many families said they had been worried after watching reports and videos about tensions and bombardment linked to Iran and the region on social media and television.

Some returnees from Saudi Arabia told relatives that areas outside US installations were calm and that there was no immediate reason for panic.

Samad Ali, 42, from Tangail's Kalibhati, who landed in Bangladesh yesterday morning from Saudi Arabia, said he boarded a Saudia flight at 2:45am from Jeddah and arrived in Dhaka around 11:40am.

He said he had been working in Makkah and returned to Dhaka after two years.

Samad said the situation in Makkah was calm, but after reaching Jeddah he heard there were disturbances near US military bases. "My family and I are now worried about what will happen after my two-month leave ends -- will my job still be there? Will there be new complications due to the evolving situation?"

He added that there were fears of missile strikes or similar incidents during the flight as well.

Blasts in Kabul

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all sides to "exercise maximum restraint, protect civilian lives".

Islamabad said its February air strikes that sparked the escalation were targeting militants.

Islamabad accuses Afghanistan of failing to act against militant groups that carry out attacks in Pakistan, which the Taliban government rejects.

The border fighting has hit multiple Afghan provinces.

The latest clashes were taking place in southern Kandahar, the defence ministry said, as well as neighbouring Zabul, according to the provincial information department.

The violence of recent days is the worst since October fighting killed more than 70 people on both sides, with land borders between the neighbours largely shut since.